

D E A D P A N



ALEX MUSSAWIR

STORIES

[ A MONSTER HOUSE PRESS CHAPBOOK ]



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STORIES

ALEX MUSSAWIR

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D E A D P A N



# THE INTERVIEW

The man shakes your hand and motions towards an empty chair for you to sit in. The man's name is Anthony. He is going to be interviewing you for the library job.

Your mom says that when a person acts nervous during a job interview it shows that the nervous person cares about the job. She says if the person doesn't care they probably would not be nervous and if the person really doesn't care they would not be interviewed at all.

You think about what your mom said, but then also wonder what the cut off is. You think 'when does this stop being endearing?'

Anthony tells you that the purpose of the interview is to determine your eligibility for the job. He says "We both need to decide if this will be a good fit."

There have been moments in your life when you have become very aware of how wrong things have gotten. Sometimes, at night, you look around your bedroom and it seems to be filled with the belongings of another person - or you speak and the words don't sound like they are coming from your voice. You do not recognize the bedroom. You cannot understand the voice. You think 'how did I end up here?' and also 'when is this going to end?'

Sitting at the desk across from Anthony you think that this is not

one of those moments, but that it is almost one of those moments.

Anthony looks down at a sheet of paper which has the interview questions on it. He asks you what you think the library job consists of.

You say the job probably consists of shelving books. You say the job also probably consists of helping people find books. You say things like that.

Anthony nods his head. Anthony asks what motivates you to work.

You feel uncertain how to define ‘work’. You think ‘isn’t everything work?’ and also ‘what motivates anyone to do anything?’

Your hands are sweating. You remind yourself to concentrate. Of course he is talking about work in the sense of this job - the job you applied for. What motivates you?

You wait a few seconds and say “Generally, money motivates me to work” hoping Anthony will laugh and then apologize for asking such a terrible question.

Instead, Anthony calmly writes down ‘money’ on his sheet of paper with the questions on it. Anthony seems disappointed in your answer. He asks if you can think of anything else. You say “I can’t think of anything else,” and he writes that down too.

At home your mom is cooking spaghetti. Your mom acts nice to you because she is worried. She asks how the interview went and you say you don’t want to talk about it.

You lay down on the couch. The couch is where you sleep because your mom’s apartment is a one bedroom. This is your bedroom.

Next to the couch is a stack of books, your laptop, and a small pile of clothes. This is everything you own. You think about minimalism and then think ‘how glamorous’.

You open your laptop and go to columbus.craigslist.org. You click on ‘food/bev/hosp’. You apply for a job as a dishwasher. You apply at a pizza shop, coffee shop, cafe. You think ‘more interviews’. You think about Anthony asking what motivates you. You want to ask your mom what motivates her but you are afraid the answer is sad. You are afraid she

does not know.

Your mom sits on the couch next to you and turns on the television. You place your head on her shoulder and fall asleep to the muffled sounds coming from the speakers and to her hand placed affectionately on the back of your neck.

You have a recurring dream where you are sitting at a desk being interviewed by an old man.

You are not nervous but he is. His hands are shaking. His forehead is dripping with sweat.

He says “You are going to have to do this for a very long time.”

He tells you that it is going to be hard work. He mentions self doubt, uncertainty.

He says “You are going to have a difficult time finding enjoyment in things that other people find enjoyable.”

The man is talking about your life.

It is not an actual job, even though it feels like it sometimes.

You think ‘this is not a good fit’.

You think ‘when is this going to end?’

And you think this is one of those times when you should have prepared something. You should have been more assertive, or maybe put on a different shirt, but before you get the chance to say anything, the man smiles a square shaped smile and says “Well, this is it...” while motioning around the room with his hands. “What else are you going to do?”

# REASONS I AM ALONE

Michael is standing barefoot in his bedroom trying to maintain an erection. He is holding, with his left hand, a slightly unraveled Magnum XL condom, while using his right hand to touch his penis in a variety of different ways. Michael is trying to picture previous sexual encounters he has had, hoping they will help him to feel more excited, but instead Michael ends up focusing on the personal details surrounding the sexual encounters, rather than the sexual encounters themselves, causing his penis to become limp inside of his outstretched palm which he continues to move back and forth in a very familiar and repetitive motion.

Michael slides the Magnum XL condom partially back into the torn wrapper and places it inside of the trashcan - deciding that, even if he had been able to maintain an erection, the condom probably would not have fit.

He had found the condom earlier that afternoon while sweeping underneath of the fridge. He was not sure whose it was or where it had came from but felt interested in 'trying it on' to see if his penis was large enough to warrant a large sized condom, or if he should instead, continue using the regular sized condoms he had in the past.

Michael looks at his cellphone, interpreting that it is 4:32 pm, and that he needs to be at the coffee shop in 28 minutes. Michael decides he should be at least five, but no more than ten minutes late. Michael

estimates the transportation time of walking, driving, and riding his bike. If Michael wants to walk he should leave now, but does not want to leave now because he has to decide on a shirt, which, Michael estimates, could take up to seven minutes and if carefully chosen could cause his self confidence to increase, which he reminds himself is an important personality trait to have on a first date.

Michael is going on a first date with a person named Elizabeth, whom he has not met, but whom his mother has met. The date was set up by Michael's mother who met Elizabeth at the hospital which employs Michael's mother. Michael thinks this is unfortunate because he is a twenty five year old man and twenty five year olds should be capable of finding their own dates, which Michael apparently is not.

Michael tongues the back of the upper right side of his mouth, applying pressure to where his wisdom teeth are coming through. Michael thinks his wisdom teeth will cause an infection because he has poor oral hygiene. He read somewhere that depressed people often have poor oral hygiene. He thinks for a moment that perhaps he is depressed but immediately dismisses the idea concluding that he is just lonely. Michael thinks if he finds a way to feel less lonely that he will feel happier - that the sadness originated from the loneliness, which in effect he blames for his poor oral hygiene.

Michael walks out of his bedroom and down the hallway to his roommate's bedroom. Michael's roommate is not home but keeps his bong on the floor by his bed and which generally has at least a small amount of weed still inside. Michael doesn't usually smoke weed but will sometimes use his roommate's bong when his roommate is not home. Michael sits cross legged on his roommate's floor and places the bong directly in front of him. He pushes his finger into the slide, places his mouth around the top of the bong, and lights the remaining weed. He inhales heavily and pulls the slide out, causing the bong to fill with smoke which quickly enters his lungs and is then exhaled via multiple uncontrollable coughs which cause him to feel slightly embarrassed.

Michael walks back into his bedroom and removes the blue t-shirt he is wearing. He sees the Magnum XL condom wrapper inside of

the trashcan and thinks again about his previous romantic relationships and begins to feel sad about them.

Most of the time Michael does not understand the reasons that cause relationships to fail. He typically settles on small details - things like dependency or possessiveness - as being the deciding factor in the relationship's not working out. Michael tongues the back of his mouth again. He thinks about how his loneliness caused his sadness and how his sadness caused his poor oral hygiene, and then considers the possibility that maybe all things can be traced back like that - that all of Michael's emotions are caused by different emotions which are also caused by things. Michael decides that if he ever has the energy and the time, he would like to one day write down all of his emotions on a very large sheet of paper and connect them to each other by drawing lines between them. Michael thinks this would, upon completion, represent the interconnectedness of his feelings. Michael would look at it sometimes to remind himself that it is never something like 'dependency' or 'possessiveness' that cause relationships to fail - that it is always something much larger and much more complex.

Michael turns and opens his closet, examining each shirt for a second or two until what feels like impulsively deciding on the blue button up. He takes the shirt from the hanger and walks to the bathroom, carrying it with both arms extended in front of him as if to create as much distance as possible between himself and the shirt. The bright light coming from the ceiling in Michael's bathroom causes him to focus on the imperfections he would have otherwise looked over - the specks of toothpaste scattered on the mirror, the paint cracking around the edge of the sink, the bags under his eyes. Michael stands shirtless for another moment, continuing to focus on each tiny imperfection, before placing both of his arms slowly through his shirt, imagining himself as a different person entirely.

# JOINING THE CONVERSATION

The women at the salon school run full speed through the parking lot every morning. They run full speed so they will not be late and they are always almost late.

I watch them run while finishing a cigarette outside of the pizza shop which is next to the salon school.

I unlock the door to the pizza shop. I turn the lights on. I turn the TV to CNN.

The show is called CNN Newsroom and Carol Costello is the anchor. Carol Costello introduces each guest by saying “Now joining the conversation is...” and then says the person’s name. Carol Costello’s tactic is to get people to argue about things and then cut the segment right before the people start to say what they actually mean.

I take the risen dough from the cooler and cut it into smaller pieces. I roll the smaller pieces into smaller balls. I do this for two hours. Sometimes if I roll a dough ball perfectly it is smooth and looks kind of like a butt cheek. A dough ball also makes a similar noise to a butt cheek when you slap it.

I am washing the dishes when my manager comes in.

He says “What’s up Frames?” to me.

Sometimes he calls me Frames, or Frames Janco, instead of my

actual name which is his weird way of making fun of me.

He started doing it after a girl from the bookstore came in and recognized me from a poetry reading.

After she left my manager patted me on the back and said “Poetry reading? Wow you really are a renaissance man.”

I told him not to call me a renaissance man.

He said “No, you definitely are. Like James Franco.”

I looked at my manager disapprovingly by tightening the muscles in my face.

“Oh look at this!” he said in a loud voice while turning his head away from me and pointing, “It’s Frames Janco!”

I stood there quietly while my manager walked away saying “Fuck yeah - Frames Janco,” to himself while doing a small fist pump.

During the lunch rush a long string of orders come through. I look around and it seems like everyone is trying their hardest. I am holding a pepperoni and thinking ‘try harder’ but feel unable to try any harder.

I am looking at Carol Costello.

The camera pans in on Carol and she says “Now joining the conversation is twenty year old pizza shop employee Frames Janco, who is preoccupied with his own death.”

I appear on the right side of the television, in a separate window from Carol.

The volume on the television is quiet and I can’t really tell what we are talking about. Carol Costello looks bored while interviewing me.

She thinks I am a bad guest for her show.

I look away from the television. I look at my manager. He is staring at me. His mouth is open and sweat is dripping from his forehead and onto his shirt. I realize I am still holding the same pepperoni. I think my aim is probably good enough that I could throw the pepperoni at him and it would land inside of his mouth. And, if I really threw it, I think he would probably open his mouth wider, perhaps even reposition his head so that the pepperoni would make it and we would both feel ac-

complished.

He says “Frames, what the hell are you doing?”

My manager looks genuinely upset with me for paying attention to the TV instead of making pizza but instead of responding to him I just place pepperonis onto the pizza as fast as I can while saying “Okay okay okay okay okay okay okay.”

# HOLES BY LOUIS SACHAR

Adam looked down at his plate and picked up two pieces of bacon. He carefully slid each of them into the sides of his upper lip and let them hang over his mouth.

“Walrus,” he said while looking at his mother.

Adam’s mother looked at Adam and kind of forced a smile, not amused at her son, who seemed too old to still be playing with his food. Adam shoved the bacon into his mouth and ran out of the kitchen towards the car.

The passenger seat of his mother’s car was covered in cigarette ash. Adam brushed it onto the floor before sitting down. He put on his seatbelt and looked at himself in the rear view mirror. There was bacon grease on his forehead which he wiped off with his shirt.

Adam’s mother got into the car and reversed out of the driveway, smiling at Adam.

“Thank you for waiting on me,” she said.

“It’s okay Mom. You wait on me all the time,” Adam said.

Adam’s mother laughed.

“Don’t forget to pick me up like 30 minutes later than usual today okay?” Adam said.

“Of course sweetie. Today’s your big day. You didn’t really think I would forget?”

Adam rolled his eyes. His mother forgot about important things all the time, but always acted like she didn't which Adam thought was hilarious.

It was Adam's first day on the safety patrol, though unlike the public schools which faced crowded intersections, Adam's school had a very large parking lot and the duties of safety patrol consisted largely of holding a crosswalk sign and smiling at passing cars.

Adam's mother pulled up in front of the school. She kissed him on the forehead and Adam gave her a look that meant he hated it when she did that. Adam jumped out of the car and ran through the school's front door without talking to anyone. He walked into the bathroom and set down his backpack. He stood in front of the mirror and looked at himself. He tried smiling and then relaxed his face again. His hair was sticking up in different directions. He spat into his hand and wiped it on the part of his hair that was sticking up. It didn't work at first, so he kept spitting into his hand and wiping it on his hair until it stopped sticking up. Adam left the bathroom and walked into his classroom.

Ellie was sitting at her desk reading. She was wearing a white and blue dress with flower patterns on it. Adam's assigned seat was directly behind Ellie.

Adam sat down and put his hands in his pockets.

Ellie turned around to face Adam.

"Good morning," she said.

"Hey Ellie," Adam said while flattening out his hair again.

Adam's hands started sweating so he took them out of his pockets.

"What are you reading?" Adam asked.

"It's called Holes by Louis Sachar. Have you heard of it?" Ellie said.

"Yeah, I read it over the summer," Adam said.

"Oh, what did you think?" Ellie asked.

"I thought it was good. How far along are you?"

Ellie reopened her book and looked at the page number.

"I'm on page 27. I just started this morning."

"Oh, well I guess let me know when you finish it," Adam said while reaching down to open his backpack.

"Did you talk to anyone on safety patrol today?" Ellie asked.

Adam pulled a comic book from his backpack and sat back up.  
"No, why?"

"Well, I heard Mrs. Gladwell had cookies and hot cocoa for everyone on patrol this morning. I figure that she'll have some for us too."

Adam smiled at Ellie. He lied when he said he had read Holes by Louis Sachar. In the margin of his comic book he wrote 'read Holes by Louis Sachar'.

Adam had lied because he wanted to impress Ellie, who was also the only reason Adam signed up for safety patrol. He had even kind of surprised himself by signing up, not realizing until afterwards that he wasn't interested in doing it at all.

\*\*\*

Ms. Wallace walked inside of the classroom and told everyone to take their seats. Adam put away his comic book and looked at Ms. Wallace who began by passing out the previous week's writing assignments.

Adam looked at a map of the world. He tried memorizing African countries but then gave up.

Ms. Wallace placed Adam's paper face down on his desk. Adam flipped over his paper and saw that Ms. Wallace had given him a D, written in large red ink, next to a note instructing him to talk to her before lunch. Adam placed the paper into his backpack and began to draw giraffes and spiders in his notebook. Ms. Wallace talked about English and then she talked about Math and by the time she gave the class a break Adam had filled four notebook pages with pictures of animals.

Adam went to the bathroom and walked back to class. He grabbed an apple juice from his backpack and drank it as fast as he could. He threw the bottle in the trash and continued reading the comic book at his desk. Ms. Wallace told the class that break was over and everyone sat down. Every day before lunch the class talked about the bible and Adam

tried very hard to pay attention.

Ms. Wallace paced around the front of the classroom, speaking about the ways in which Jesus transformed the lives of his disciples. She described, in detail, how each of his disciples were living in sin until Jesus helped them to live in a way that more accurately reflected their relationship with God. Ms. Wallace then called on students to read certain sentences from the bible that supported what she had just said.

Ms. Wallace then used an example from her own life - a story of how her father overcame his addiction to alcohol after hearing God tell him, in the form of a dream, that there were ‘bigger plans’ for Mr. Wallace, who 10 years later, was still sober and a well off used car salesman.

A student in the back of the classroom raised his hand.

“Yes Scott?” Ms. Wallace said.

Scott cleared his throat and said “How did your father know it was God talking to him?” while looking like he had just told a very funny joke.

Ms. Wallace relaxed her posture and smiled. “That’s a good question Scott. You should know by now that God is speaking to all of us all of the time. One of the best things about being in a personal relationship with him is that he is *always* talking to you. It might be in ways that you weren’t expecting, but he is always there. You just have to be listening.”

Adam opened his comic book again. Next to the note about Holes he wrote ‘listen for god’.

Ms. Wallace read a few more passages from the bible and then asked everyone to pray for ten minutes before lunch. Adam closed his eyes and prayed that safety patrol would go well and that Ellie would like him back. He thanked God for having a personal relationship with him, even though he wasn’t quite sure what that meant. *Amen, amen.*

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Ms. Wallace dismissed the class for lunch. Adam put his books back into his backpack and flattened out his hair with spit again.

He walked up to Ms. Wallace’s desk.

"Um, Ms. Wallace?" Adam said. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Oh, yes. Adam," Ms. Wallace said while placing her papers into a folder and relaxing in her seat. She pointed at a chair next to her desk.

"Take a seat," she said.

Adam walked over to the chair and pushed it towards her desk. He sat down and looked at Ms. Wallace. He thought she looked very pretty. Adam liked the way her hair reflected light. Adam thought about how smooth her skin looked and imagined his skin rubbing against it.

"Adam, how are you?" Ms. Wallace asked.

"Okay I guess," Adam said.

Ms. Wallace nodded. "And how are things at home?"

"At home? It's fine. Same as usual," Adam said.

"Okay, okay that's good then," Ms. Wallace said.

Adam didn't say anything. His mouth was dry.

"And what about here, at school? I notice that you usually aren't out playing with the other boys during recess."

"Yeah, I guess not."

"And why's that?"

"I dunno. All they do is play soccer and I don't like soccer."

"Well, some of them have those, um, trading cards."

"Yeah."

"Don't like those either?"

Adam shook his head.

"Well I'm sorry, I was just seeing if something was bothering you."

Ms. Wallace cleared her throat.

"I've noticed your grades have been dropping lately," she said.

"Sorry," Adam said.

"No, don't apologize! I want to help you Adam. Here, look at this."

Ms. Wallace reached into her desk and grabbed a folder filled with copies of Adam's previous writing assignments. She pulled out two sheets of paper and set them down on her desk.

"Now Adam, see this one? It was perfect. I mean, look at your

cursive. This was the best paper in class.”

Adam shrugged. He felt good about writing the best paper in class.

Ms. Wallace continued. “But then look here, at last week’s assignment.”

She pointed at the second sheet of paper. It was five sentences written in messy cursive.

“This was supposed to be a full page describing a time you spent with your family. You wrote five sentences that I can’t even read.”

Adam felt unsure how to react, so he responded by calmly staring at his shoes.

Ms. Wallace seemed suddenly irritated. “Now, Adam. I know you’re smarter than this. The previous papers you have turned in show me that. Why the sudden lack of effort?”

Adam looked up and stared at Ms. Wallace. He looked at her eyes. He tightened the muscles in his face.

“Because, I didn’t want to do it,” he said.

Ms. Wallace nodded. She asked Adam what he thought he should do in the future.

Adam became suddenly energetic. “I will ask God to help. Like your Dad did with his drinking. God will help me with my not caring. I’ll be perfect from now on I promise Ms. Wallace.”

Ms. Wallace smiled. “Okay, now get to lunch.”

Adam grabbed his backpack and ran out of the classroom at full speed while Ms. Wallace sat back in her chair and sighed.

\*\*\*

Adam tried to pay attention for the rest of class. Ms. Wallace talked about the civil war and then everyone in class took turns reading from the history book. Adam stared at Ms. Wallace so he wouldn’t be distracted. She was wearing a button up shirt and tight khaki pants. He wondered why she wasn’t married. He thought she looked nicer than any other teacher he had.

Fifteen minutes before class was over an older teacher named Mrs. Gladwell walked into the classroom. Ms. Wallace smiled and waved at Mrs. Gladwell, who waved back by lifting her arm into the air, revealing to the classroom that her armpits were covered in sweat.

Mrs. Gladwell instructed all of the students on safety patrol to meet her in the teacher's lounge. Adam got out of his seat and followed Mrs. Gladwell to the teacher's lounge with Ellie and six other students.

Mrs. Gladwell assigned Adam and Ellie with taking down the school's American flag and gave all of the other students, who were assigned to patrol the crosswalk, light green vests and crosswalk signs before leading everyone outside in a very long and straight line.

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Adam, Ellie, and Mrs. Gladwell walked together to the flagpole. The last bell had just rang and children were running out of the building. Mrs. Gladwell showed them how to fold in triangles and explained that they must not let the flag touch the ground. The flag was slowly compacted into a small triangle of red white and blue, which Mrs. Gladwell handed carefully to Adam who was smiling and extremely energetic.

Mrs. Gladwell instructed Adam and Ellie to bring the flag back to the teacher's lounge. She said she would meet them there.

Adam and Ellie turned around and walked slowly back towards the school. Adam asked Ellie if she would like to hold the flag and she said that she did not.

The table in the teacher's lounge was neatly arranged with hot coco and Oreo cookies when they arrived with the flag.

Ellie smiled and said, "See Adam, I told you so!"

Adam quickly set down the flag and sat on the couch. Ellie sat down next to him and Adam realized suddenly that this was the first time in his life he had been alone in a room with a girl his own age.

Ellie looked at Adam and said "I am having fun."

"Yeah - I am glad I signed up," Adam said.

Adam poured a small cup of hot cocoa for himself. He was expecting Mrs. Gladwell or the other students to walk in any minute. Adam said a quick prayer in his head about Ellie and then set his hot coco down on the table.

Adam's hands were sweatier than they had been all day and it seemed possible, at this exact moment, that they might literally begin dripping.

"Um, do you like me?" Adam said in a surprising, and abrupt seeming way while making eye contact with Ellie.

"Like you?" she said, slightly adjusting her posture away from Adam, "Like you how?"

Adam did not move. He focused on her eyes.

"You know. Like, 'like like' me."

Adam felt his blood move into his face. "Like, do you want to be my girlfriend?"

Ellie was quiet. She continued making eye contact with Adam, but did not say anything.

"The only reason I'm asking is because I think I really like you. I mean, I don't know. It's hard to explain," Adam was quiet for a second and then said "It's just what I want."

Ellie set down her hot cocoa, slowly stood up, and without breaking eye contact with Adam, left the room, closing the door behind her.

\*\*\*

"Mom just go."

"Hold on honey, the parking lot is crowded."

"No mom, just drive. Please."

"Sweetie, slow down. I'm trying."

"Why is this so hard? Just move the car forward. With your foot."

"Adam, I'm trying my best. What on earth is the matter with you?"

"Please mom. Don't talk to me right now. Just drive. Drive drive drive."

“Okay, I’m driving.”

Adam’s mother turned out of the school’s parking lot and Adam set his head against the passenger seat window.

“Okay, now sweetie what is bothering you?”

“Mom, I seriously don’t think you would understand. Please can you just be quiet? For once in my life?”

“Adam, you’re worrying me. Can you just talk to me?”

“Mom, not now. Okay?”

“Honey, this is making me sad. Seeing you like this and all.”

“*Mom, just shut up.*”

Adam ran into the house and went straight to his room. He laid on his bed and wrapped his body in blankets. He began crying but he cried quietly. He cried more when he thought about going back to school - about having to sit next to Ellie all day, about what her friends would think, about explaining all of this to his mother. No, he was doomed, he was sure of it.

Adam sat up, walked to the bathroom, and vomited onto the floor, returning promptly to his bedroom.

\*\*\*

Adam felt calm after dinner. He hugged his mother but didn’t want to talk about Ellie. Adam went into the kitchen and drank whole milk out of the gallon, holding it with both hands. His mother laughed while smoking a cigarette and told him to use a glass.

Adam walked back into his room and unzipped his backpack. He took out his comic book and saw his notes from earlier. He carefully ripped out the part that said ‘read Holes by Louis Sachar’ and felt better after ripping it out. He looked at the second note, the one reminding him to listen for God, and felt, suddenly, like he had it all figured out. He threw his comic book on the floor and ran into the living room to find a bible.

Adam flipped to the back of the bible and looked through the

index. He found the section for sadness and ripped it out. The page consisted of a long list of verses about sadness and Adam read them in order. He repeated the verses to himself over and over again hoping they would comfort him. He did this for over an hour and felt extremely surprised at how well he was paying attention.

It was late but Adam didn't feel tired. He continued reading verses until he couldn't focus anymore. He put the bible back in the living room bookshelf, doing his best to tape the sadness page back in place.

Adam walked back into his room and took off his clothes. He put on a large t-shirt. He turned the lights off and laid in his bed. He looked up at the ceiling and started to pray in a quiet voice.

"God, this is Adam. Um, Ms. Wallace today said that you are always speaking to us. You know, because I have accepted Christ and all. And I really need to know what to do right now."

"I'm sure you know by now about me and Ellie, but I just don't understand what I did wrong."

Adam was quiet for a moment.

"God, what did I do wrong?"

Adam shut his eyes and listened.

There was light from the moon coming in through Adam's window. He opened his eyes and saw shadows on his walls from the flowers his mother had planted. He imagined the shadows moving. He pictured the dark shapes coming alive and speaking to him. Like Moses, Adam thought.

Adam's hands were sweating again. He was staring at the shadows in his room, holding his breath, listening for any sound - something he could identify as divine.

Adam thought about Ms. Wallace's story, about God showing himself to her father. He thought about all of the saints and priests in the bible. Adam didn't understand why God would speak to all of these people but not to him.

Adam thought about his mother and the other kids at school. He imagined all of them standing in a row, laughing and worshiping together - their faces becoming unrecognizable shapes of white light as God

looked down on them and smiled.

Adam sat up in bed continuing to listen for God and, feeling convinced he would not be returning to school the next day, stayed like that for hours - alone in his room talking to himself.

# ARTISTIC STATEMENT

Clara says something about graffiti being justifiable if it makes some type of artistic statement, but that these scribbles on the side of her house are *just criminal*.

I remind Clara that it is a rental and not to worry about it.

Clara used to be funny. Now Clara is not funny and in fact has completely stopped telling jokes.

# SASHA & EMILY, 1992

One of the only vivid memories she has of her father is actually a memory of her brother's, who has recited it so consistently, and with such detail, over the past twenty-two years, that it is often one of the first things Emily mentions when asked about her childhood.

Emily's mother divorced Emily's father the year Emily was born and since then she has seen her father on exactly three separate occasions. The first - a birthday party - took place when Emily turned two, and the day, though largely forgotten, was encapsulated in the form of a  $2 \times 4^{1/2}$  in. photograph which Emily saw for the first time at age 23, shortly after the death of her mother.

Emily found the photograph in the top left drawer of her mother's dresser, but it wasn't until flipping the photograph over, reading '*Sasha & Emily, 1992*' written in her mother's sloppy cursive, that she identified the uncomfortable looking man in the picture as her father. Realizing this, Emily immediately ran downstairs to her brother, who was sat at the kitchen table surrounded by more stacks of their mother's things, and showed him the photograph, at which point he almost instantly began to cry, but who's tears, Emily assumes, were caused more prominently by the simple task of rummaging through their deceased mother's home, or maybe, in part, due to *Thunder Road* by Bruce Springsteen, which had just begun playing softly through two small speakers in the corner.

The next time Emily saw her father was during a weekend trip she took with her brother one summer to Lake Erie, outside of Cleveland, Ohio. Emily's father had persuaded Emily's mother, via a long and eloquently hand-written letter, to let him have the kids for a weekend - that he would take them camping, fishing, or perhaps even to a Cleveland Indian's game, who, after a 232 day strike initiated by the *MLBPA* (Major League Baseball Player's Association), were actually playing quite well in 1995.

Emily's mother, though hesitant, agreed to make the drive to Cleveland from their home in Columbus, given that she have the chance to speak with Sasha first, to '*ease her mind about the whole thing*'.

Emily says she remembers feeling an 'overwhelming sense of loneliness' upon first entering her father's apartment. Her mother, who would not be considered wealthy, always managed to keep the refrigerator and cabinets stocked with at least a small amount food, but it wasn't until seeing her father's kitchen that Emily understood how bare and empty a room could be.

It was the same with the rest of her father's apartment. The living room consisted of a small bookshelf, an old record player, and a pullout couch, that Emily's brother later pointed out, might have very well been purchased specifically in anticipation of their arrival. There were no pictures hanging on the walls, no decorations, no clutter of any kind. Emily walked around slowly, touching each wall for a second or two with an outstretched finger, trying to understand how a human being, her father in particular, could live in a place like this.

Emily's mother sat in the kitchen speaking with Sasha while Emily and her brother stood hesitantly by their father's bookshelf - it's contents written mostly in Russian and completely incomprehensible to either Emily or her brother.

It became apparent however, while overhearing her mother speak to her father in the kitchen, that the bareness of her father's apartment translated almost exactly to his personality. Sasha, who didn't learn English until his mid twenties, chose his words carefully and deliberately, creating almost no verbal waste - causing anybody who spoke to him to

listen very closely, concentrating on each and every syllable.

Besides the Russian accent, (which was not represented by Emily, her brother, or her mother) Emily's father looked as though he were perpetually experiencing some type of small physical pain causing his body motions to appear very awkward and misplaced. Emily noticed that whenever she made eye contact with her father he looked back at her, squinting a little bit, as though staring into a very large and very bright light.

It wasn't until years later that Emily found herself thinking of her father as she went through life feeling as though she were constantly re-positioning herself while being forced to sit for a very long time.

The only part of the weekend Emily remembers, or believes she remembers, took place the next day when Emily's father took her and her brother fishing. The three of them drove to a popular part of Lake Erie where many other fathers took their children to catch fish.

Emily's father brought one fishing pole for the three of them to share and Emily's brother carried the pole enthusiastically through a small stretch of trail leading to the lake. Upon reaching the water Sasha clumsily demonstrated how to cast a line using the fishing pole, and after it was set the three of them sat silently while watching the bobber move up and down on top of the lake.

Sasha reeled the line in and cast it out again every few minutes for an undetermined amount of time without catching anything. He kept calmly saying "Fish not biting," and Emily's brother - who had never been fishing, and appeared to be very invested in the fish biting - looked extremely disappointed.

A few minutes passed and Sasha reeled the line in again. He set the pole down in the dirt and looked first at Emily, and then at her brother.

He said "My father used to fish. He used net and boat made of wood."

Emily nodded at her father while feeling uninterested in fishing in general.

Sasha said “The man at store said I should use pole, not net. He said pole will not break and will catch more fish.”

Sasha laughed while picking up the fishing pole.

“Pole not break?” he repeated skeptically to himself while sort of inspecting the fishing pole.

Sasha then began to bend the fishing pole by pushing the top end towards the bottom end, showing it to his children. Sasha bent the pole multiple times, each time bending it more, until he had nearly bent the pole in half without it breaking.

“Pole not break!” he repeated again, this time appearing more convinced that the pole would, in fact, not actually break, even if bent in half. Sasha laughed very loudly at this before standing up and walking towards the car with Emily and her brother, taking turns playfully patting each of their heads with his large and calloused hands.

They returned to Sasha’s apartment where they sat on the couch listening to classical Russian composers, whose names Emily has rarely even attempted to pronounce.

According to Emily’s brother, Emily had been irritable and complaining for much of the trip, and Sasha, at a loss for ways to entertain his five year old daughter, walked to his bookshelf, sliding his finger across the spines of each book. Sasha looked over long unabridged novels by Gogol, Tolstoy, Kundera, and Dostoevsky, before carefully pulling out a worn copy of J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in The Rye* - one of the only books on Sasha’s bookshelf actually written in English.

Sasha sat back down in between Emily and her brother on the couch, slowly flipping through the yellowed pages of the novel.

He said “Your mother read this to me when we first met.”

Emily and her brother said nothing as Sasha opened the book and began to read aloud, taking his time to pronounce each word correctly, running his large thumb across the page as he spoke. Emily says she felt as if time were standing still as her father read aloud to her, stopping for a moment after each sentence to catch his breath.

The next, and last time, Emily saw her father was at his funeral,

which happened, tragically, six months after the death of her mother.

The funeral took place at Sasha's apartment, which was the same apartment Emily and her brother had visited 18 years before, and it was attended by a small handful of Sasha's immediate family members plus a few other people who Emily and her brother were never properly introduced to. Emily agreed to speak on behalf of her father, as she feared nobody else would have an awful lot to say.

Emily took a deep breath before getting the attention of the room, and began to recite, slowly and with detail, the time that she and her brother visited their father 18 years before, and Emily's brother, who stood quietly in back of the room, didn't question his sister's memory for even a second.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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